

SCENERY, ARTISTIC PLACE, AND ARTISTIC TIME IN FOLK THEATER*

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Scenery in our theater is organically connected with the stage and its shape, which is box-like. Scenery has two dominant functions, the first of which is the depiction of a particular place where the action and the time of the action unfold. Thus in A.S. Puškin's **Boris Godunov** the scenery depicts not only particular locales in Old Russia, but also the period in which the action takes place. Secondly, scenery aids the actor in his performance.

In this essay we will analyze the function of scenery in folk theater as it defines the location and time of the action.

The function of the representation of the play's locale is clearly and distinctively fulfilled in the scenery of the Czech and Slovak folk Christmas plays. In this case the function of scenery is fulfilled by the **jaščík** [box], inside of which puppets or a picture depict the birth of Christ. The **jaščík** is called either "Bethlehem" [vifleem], or "a manger" and is situated in front of the audience during the entire performance. "Bethlehem" constitutes the scenery, determining the time and place of the action per-

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formed by live actors representing shepherds, angels, the three Magi, and so on. The presence of "Bethlehem" on stage indicates only in a general way the time and place of the action: specifically, that the action takes place at Christmas in the area where Christ was born; that is, in Bethlehem. This feature of "Bethlehem" allows for the performance of the scene in which the angel tells the shepherds about the birth of Christ when they are somewhere in the wilderness keeping their sheep; that is, away from Bethlehem, as well as the scene in which they come to pay homage to the Christ Child and are in Bethlehem itself.

The Slovak play "The Journey to Bethlehem at Christmas" opens in this way. The shepherds Fedor and Staxa (actors dressed as shepherds) go from house to house and ask permission of each master to put on a Christmas play. An angel enters the place where they are received and says "Glory" and then places "Bethlehem" on a table and sings: "Here, here, Christians, to the manger of the Lord." When the angel has finished his song the shepherds, standing before the door, begin to sing: "Ho, shepherds. A strong voice is singing there. Arise quickly and see what is there. We are not dreaming, the angels are not singing that. There we will find something new, something unheard of." There follows a relatively long conversation among the shepherds of a mainly comic nature. The shepherds then lie down and fall asleep. An angel sings "Gloria, Gloria, in excelsis Deo!"

In the variant given "Bethlehem" is a distinctive set that is on the table in the chamber during the entire performance of the Christmas play, and as was mentioned above, constitutes the scenery which indicates the time of the enactment of the play, the birth

of Christ, and the place of the action; that is Bethlehem.

In other variants of the Christmas play "Bethlehem" is not on stage when the shepherds are in the pasture. After the angel calls them, the shepherds undertake the journey to Bethlehem where the Bethlehem *jaščík* is situated.

The scenery is a distinctive and integral part of the folk theater stage that determines the actors' movements. The movements indicate the place where the drama unfolds. A striking example of such scenery is seen in the Russian folk play "The Boat (*Lodka*)" in which the robbers act out the construction of a ship through theatrical movements and create a visual image of a boat in which they then seat themselves and row, and in which the Cossack ataman and the captain walk. The robbers show, by means of a certain movement, that they are jumping from the boat to the shore. This is performed without any material representation on stage of either the boat or the shore. Through theatrical gestures the rowers show that the boat is moving down the river. During the voyage there are dialogues between the Cossack ataman and the captain, and individual scenes are performed, all of which indicate the duration of the voyage.

Describing the performance of the Christmas play "The Journey to Bethlehem at Christmas," Jan Kopecky says: "This theatrical device (the scenery) theoretically provides unlimited space. The corner of the hut [in which the performance takes place] is utilized as a pasture, for the shepherds sleep on the floor of the room. The angel awakens them and they go to Bethlehem. They do not, however, leave their previous station. They walk round, rhythmically knocking crooks on the floor, then return to their

former position. The pasture, however, has now become Bethlehem. But the journey has been long, for the shepherds are weary. Their heads nod, they lean on their crooks, and fall asleep on their feet. Sometimes the shepherds don't move from their place at all. They represent their long journey by the knocking of their crooks."¹

What is of interest here is that the knocking of the crooks--that is, the sound--representing the journey, changes the scene of the action (we could say, changes the scenery); this transforms the pasture into Bethlehem. The knocking of the crooks, the sound alone, signifies the movement of the shepherds.

Folk theater, like medieval theater, and in contrast to French Classical theater, does not follow the law of unity of place. On the contrary, the scene of the action in folk theater changes constantly during the performance. In the examples cited by us concerning the creation of scenery by the movements of the actors, we have shown how a long river voyage is represented on stage. As far as the audience is concerned, the shepherds in the Christmas play have made the journey from the pasture to Bethlehem. The absence of pictorial or three-dimensional scenery allows the actors to change scenes quickly. Concerning the plays depicting the martyrdom of George or Varvara, Jan Kopecky writes: "While the king sat on the bench, the spectators were in the palace. When the actor portraying the king moved off toward the spectators, the stage was transformed into a dungeon and the throne became the rack. Later, when Jurij or Varvara had moved aside, the king again mounted the throne and the spectators were returned to the palace."²

The actors' lines play a major role

Having cut off Zmeulan's head, Anika-voin addresses his body with the words:

Sleep, sleep hero,
In the damp earth. . . .

and immediately after addressing Zmeulan's corpse, Anika-voin says to Tsar Maximilian:

Here, dread Maximilian,
is the body of your enemy.

This address to the tsar reveals that the meadow on which Zmeulan and Anika-voin have fought was somewhere not far from Tsar Maximilian. At any rate, it is not indicated either in the characters' words or in the stage directions that they have shifted the action somewhere, and Tsar Maximilian orders that praise be sung to the hero. Everyone (around the throne) sings the song:

Praise, praise to you, hero,
For you have saved the city of Anton.

Tsar Maximilian further orders the executioner Brambeus to "take him (Adolf) to the place of execution and put him to a cruel death: cut off the right side of his head."

The spectators, however, have no idea where the place of execution is, for this place is designated neither by the movement of the actors nor by an artistic representation in the play. The audience does not know whether it is far from the throne of Tsar Maximilian or close to it.

The executioner Brambeus chops off Adolf's head and then, having killed his friend, commits suicide. The stage directions indicate that "Adolf and the executioner fall." Next Maximilian summons two old gravediggers. A footman brings them. On the way to the tsar's throne the old men stumble on the bodies of Adolf and Brambeus and fall:

Old men: Fie, the devil take it!

What's this log doing here?

Anika-voin: These are not logs,
but the tsar's **voevods** [military commanders].

Old men: You have all the tsar's **voevods**.

And addressing the tsar they say, "Greetings, Lord-Tsar Maximilian."

So the place of execution on stage is shown to be near Tsar Maximilian's throne. After stumbling on the bodies, the old men greet the tsar. We see again the different settings of the action: the throne of Maximilian, surrounded by the court, and the place of execution where Adolf and Brambeus are killed, which is near Maximilian's throne.

Sometimes the setting is described verbally. The Arab in one variant of "Tsar Maximilian" enthusiastically exclaims,

Well, what a place this is! What garments of many colors! How it all glows so brightly! Who lives in this palace?

to which all reply: "The Russian tsar."

We see here no indication, in decor or anything else, which might corroborate the enthusiasm of the Arab. The audience, hearing these exclamations, must believe the Arab and is delighted along with him by the picture conjured up solely through his words.

Artistic time in folklore differs radically from chronological time. The Russian tale tells us that "the tale is told quickly, but matters don't happen that quickly." In order to show that the action occurs over a long period of time (for instance, the depiction of the life of a man from birth to old age) the play in our theater is divided into acts, and each act is separated by an entr'acte, in the course of which a long time has passed (several years). We will give

an example from the folk drama "Tsar Maximilian." Tsar Maximilian orders the footman to "take my erring son to the dungeon." The footman takes Adolf away. After this the tsar asks the footman, "Who is singing so mournfully?" The footman walks off, and on returning reports that it is Adolf who is singing mournfully. Tsar Maximilian orders that his son be brought forth, and the footman brings him. The tsar addresses his son:

Hearken, my dear son,
You have sat in the dungeon for four years.

Everything that happens on stage, beginning with the departure of Adolf to the prison and up to his return to Maximilian's throne occupies roughly four minutes, while in the play Tsar Maximilian indicates this time period as four years.

Such examples of the sharp disparity between chronological and artistic time are often encountered in folk plays. Furthermore, the change of the actors' makeup in each act likewise shows that a long time between individual acts has passed.

We have shown that time and place in folk theater are only outlined; as in the epos, they are only spoken about. It is as if the profusion of action absorbs time and place.

NOTES

- 1 Jan Kopecky, "Obrana Konvence," **Divadlo** [1967] únor.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 N.E. Ončukov, "Tsar Maksim'jan" in **Severnye narodnye dramy** (St. Petersburg, 1911).